

Abstract

The Axiology of Creation: Metaphysical Foundations for a Political Theology of the Environment

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Secular environmental philosophy has often struggled to provide a satisfactory grounding for any obligation to conserve the natural world. While arguments in favor of conserving animals are easy enough to produce due to the similarities between the consciousnesses of other animals and human beings (the typical loci of moral consideration), it is more difficult to explain why we should think that we have any obligation to conserve non-animal features of the natural world such as plants, bodies of water, canyons, or any other non-conscious feature of nature.

In this paper, I will argue that the very act of creation that is at the origin of the Christian faith provides a metaphysical grounding for the value of the environment. In the account of the creation of the universe that is provided in the book of Genesis, after creating the natural world, God pronounces it to be “good”. Given that God, in Christian theology, is identified with reason, the Good, truth, beauty, and being itself, His pronouncement that the natural world is good cannot be written off or ignored. Instead, this axiological pronouncement at the beginning

of all things must be regarded as normative and binding for all Christians and as providing some direction for how we should live within the world. Importantly, the Christian faith is not one of isolation and even the desert monastics recognized that community was central to Christian life. When we consider that Christian theology demands the formation of a certain form of political life, and when we consider that the very act of creation which brought the universe into existence was itself imbued with value, the relationship that Christians have to the environment must be reevaluated.

This paper will be divided into several parts. In the introduction, I will further explain the problem with grounding an environmental ethic of the non-conscious aspects of nature within secular thought insofar as secular environmental ethics reduce moral consideration to the well-being of conscious beings and has no ground for treating the non-conscious world in any way other than utilitarian subservient to consciousness as the sole loci of moral consideration. In the second part, I will develop the way in which God's pronouncement that creation is "good" provides a deep metaphysical basis for axiological reflection on the environment. Insofar as God is, for the Christian, the source of all objective moral judgments, a direct pronouncement of the goodness of creation equates to a direct moral imperative to behave towards it in certain determinate ways. In the following part, I will apply this axiology within the recent political theology of John Milbank, Rowan Williams, and Giorgio Agamben in order to examine how the axiology of creation is able to be enacted within the political dimension, the ecclesia, which is the center of Christian life. Finally, I will suggest some ways in which the monastic tradition can be drawn upon as exemplars of what Christian political theology which strives for harmony with nature might look like. The conclusion of this paper is that Christian political theology must

consider its duty to the environment in light of the axiology of creation which demands a political theology emphasizing an important ascetic element.